

# Denotation and Connotation

## ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

**denotation:** a word's dictionary meaning or literal meaning

**connotation:** shades of meaning conveyed by a word; the emotional associations a word has for most readers or listeners

**synonym:** a word that has the same or almost the same meaning as another word

**context:** the words or sentences that surround a word; may help the reader figure out both its denotation and connotation

## HERE'S HOW

**Step 1: Recognize when a word's meaning is unfamiliar.** Consider whether a word has more than one meaning, or denotation. In the following example, the word *bold*, which can mean *courageous*, must have a different meaning. If you try substituting *courageous* for *bold*, the example makes no sense. You must find a new meaning.

**EXAMPLE** The young boy's parents punished him for being too *bold*.

**Step 2: Check a word's denotation(s) in the dictionary.** Looking up *bold* in a dictionary reveals that it has several **denotations**, or literal meanings, one of which will work best in a given sentence.

**EXAMPLE** **denotations of bold:** 1.*courageous*. 2.*shameless, brazen*.

**Step 3: Examine context to determine a word's connotation.** A word's connotation, or emotional association, goes beyond its dictionary meaning. Look for **context** clues-such as other words in the same sentence-to determine whether a word's connotation is positive or negative. For example, *cautious* may connote either commonsense or fear.

**EXAMPLE** **Positive connotation:** The scout was **cautious** and *alert*.

**Negative connotation:** The scout was **cautious** and *timid*.

**Step 4: Choose words carefully, noting their connotations.** Words with the same meanings may have a wide range of positive, neutral, or negative feelings. The example shows several synonyms for *bold*, each with its own connotations-some positive, some negative.

**EXAMPLE** **Positive:** The hero's attempt to rescue the wounded was *daring*.

**Positive:** The hero's attempt to rescue the wounded was *brave*.

**Negative:** The hero's attempt to rescue the wounded was *rash*.

**Negative:** The hero's attempt to rescue the wounded was *foolhardy*.